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ABSTRACT

Because good future studies and good fiction have a great deal in common, futurists need to recognize and apply the skills of word artists from all genres, particularly novelists and short-story writers. One form of science fiction that futurists could use is the scenario, which is an exploration of an alternative future. A good scenario should be relevant, organized around key branching points, credible and useful, and intelligible. Tips for short-story writing, such as those by Ben Bova in his book "Notes to a Science Fiction Writer," should be considered by futurists. For example, good writing should invent complex characters, not stereotypes. While science fiction and scenarios are both useful for future studies, there is need for a new genre of writing called future fiction. Its aim would be to popularize the findings of futures research and to fix images of plausible and desirable futures in the minds of the general public. Future fiction would contain many of the characteristics of a good scenario and would depict believable complex human characters in realistic situations. The genre could be modeled on contemporary historical novels, the formula best-seller, or the made-for-TV miniseries. (RM)

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Lane Jennings

9 June 1984

Talk for WFS General Assembly
Thurs. 14 June 1984

The Future As Fiction

Futurists don't always admit this, but in fact, they are artists, not scientists. They may gather statistics, use elaborate computer models and complex analytical techniques to produce their forecasts and projections, but in the end what these amount to are simply images of a world that does not exist.

My theme this morning is that good future studies and good fiction have a great deal in common. The future IS fiction--or, more accurately, all futures are fictions--and I believe that futurists need to recognize and apply the skills of word artists from all genres: particularly novelists and short-story writers. Dave Smith and Warren Wagar have stressed the value to futurists of READING science fiction.[1] I propose that WRITING a special kind of science fiction can aid futures thinking even more.

Science Fiction and Scenarios

But most science fiction stories produced to date have major flaws when considered as material for "serious" future studies. To begin with, most existing SF was written primarily to entertain readers and impress editors, not to stimulate futures thinking or aid decision-making. Secondly, science fiction stories--even when they are not exclusively action-focused--often tend to exaggerate the role of the lone hero or small group in solving problems and promoting change on a planet-wide, or even a

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cosmic scale. The "myth of the great individual" which has largely been superseded in contemporary writing about the past, lives on in our most popular visions of the future. Think of Captain Kirk in Star Trek; Luke Skywalker in Star Wars; or Paul M'aud Dib in Frank Herbert'sDune!

Finally, there is the problem, from a futurist's standpoint, that much of science fiction deals with events that are unusual for their setting. Not only are we transported forward or back in time, to a planet or even a galaxy "far, far away," when we get there we find that things are in crisis, or else about to be. We learn relatively little that would help us get through daily life with its minor decisions and problems in a future context. And yet, if we were really to live in such a future world that is precisely the information we would want and need. For all these reasons, and others, Science Fiction is seldom taken seriously by professional futurists--at least not as a guide to plausible behavior or decion-making.

But one more or less "respectable" form of science fiction for futurists does exist: the "scenario." This term, which seems to have first been used in a futures research context by Herman Kahn, has been defined as "an exploration of an alternative future," or "an outline of one conceivable state of affairs given certain assumptions."[2]

Ian H. Wilson lists four characteristics of a good scenario. It should be

* relevant--that is, it should describe an aspect of the future that is of direct concern to the reader;

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* organized around key branching points--that is, it should focus on situations in which some significant decision or action needs to be taken;

* credible and useful--that is, it should reflect a sound knowledge and understanding of present-day priorities, concerns, activities, and problems in the area or organization whose future it sets out to describe; and

* intelligible--that is, written in a manner easy to understand and use.[3]

By way of contrast, listen to Ben Bova's advice for creating good science fiction from his 1975 book Notes to a Science Fiction Writer:

* invent complex characters not stereotypes--and make them human-like (even if physically alien) in having doubts, worries, internal conflicts;

* focus on a flawed protagonist--someone with many strengths and at least one major weakeness--and tell the story as much as possible entirely from this protagonist's point of view;

* introduce a problem that plays on your protagonist's weakness in a painful way--whatever action or decision your protagonist makes ought to hurt--avoid effortless choices and easy victories even if your story ends happily

* keep your reader in suspense as long as possible, but avoid "trick" endings. The outcome may surprise the reader, but, on reflection, it should appear plausible given the assumptions and character developments revealed throughout the story;

* make background setting internally consistent, but keep

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detailed explanation and description to a minimum--reveal background by showing how it affects the actions and choices of your protagonist, rather than citing statistics or retelling history;

* finally, give both protagonist and setting some connection to a past and a future--introduce an element of continuity that implies the world and the beings you describe did not simply appear from nowhere when you began to write but represent links in a long chain of existence. This is a subtle way to add believability however wild your images and inventions may be.[4]

As Bova himself notes, these characteristics are not limited to science fiction, but apply to all kinds of fiction--especially the short-story form. Novels offer enough space for a writer to violate many of Bova's suggestions and still maintain reader interest. Nevertheless, most fiction writing by futurists in the form of scenarios tends to be short--far shorter, say, than a utopian novel--so these tips for short-story writing can be considered appropriate.

But look at how far most professional futurist "scenarios" stray from the ideal of "good short fiction" Bova outlines.

* many scenarios consist entirely of description--they read not like a story at all, but like an encyclopedia entry;

* where characters do occur they are often dull, stereotyped figures with no distinctive individual traits, no evidence of internal conflict, and little potential for growth and change;

* scenarios that set out to present a typical day's activity for a family or individual at some time in the future, almost invariably pick a day when nothing is happening in the world at large, when the society described is apparently stable if not

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downright immutable. The inference of such scenarios is that at some point in the future the ultimate will be achieved and that any further growth or change for society will be rendered ~~little~~ superfluous. Good future or bad future, in scenarios it too often seems that the possibility for choice or for active future thinking no longer exists.

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My conclusion from this brief comparison is that, while science fiction and scenarios are both useful for future studies, there is a need for something more--a new genre of writing I call FUTURE FICTION--a mixed form that would contain elements of both scenario and fiction. Its aim would be to popularize the findings of serious futures research and to fix images of plausible and desirable futures in the minds of the general public. But it would accomplish this by providing the same pleasures and excitements that keep people reading traditional mainstream fiction.

I want to emphasize that word "mainstream." The audience for future fiction should not be drawn exclusively from current science fiction fans, but should embrace the widest possible cross section of the reading public--with special emphasis on decision-makers in every area of life (and not just public life either!) In short, the same sorts of people who would come to a conference like this one, or subscribe to magazines like THE FUTURIST, should be entertained and challenged by Future Fiction.

What might this Future Fiction be like? Well, like the scenario, FF should be RELEVANT to its readers' concerns. It should deal with decision-points in the lives of individuals, families, companies, institutions--perhaps even governments; but not on the macro-scale of global or interstellar crisis often found in action-oriented, catastrophe-focused science fiction. Also, like the scenario, Future Fiction should be written to be understood and believed. This means avoiding jargon, yet drawing on a base of sound background research that establishes credibility in the mind of the reader. Unlike scenarios, and indeed unlike

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much idea-based science fiction, Future Fiction should depict believable human characters acting from complicated motives, with limited understanding and abilities, to fulfill a desire or avoid a setback. The protagonists in Future Fiction should not be stereotypes, but individuals with internal conflicts, doubts, prejudices and, above all, weaknesses as well as strengths. Their actions and decisions should clearly involve both emotion and logic to appropriate degrees.

The background of an FF story may be extremely detailed, but this detail should only be brought out in the story through action. Instead of describing the world of 1990 following a global food crisis in the Third World as a conventional scenario might do, or imagining how one key individual might trigger a revolt of the starving, as some SF stories have done, a Future Fiction approach might be to depict the effects of food shortages on Thanksgiving dinner for one American family--what they ate, what they said to each other, what they wished for and worried about. To help readers feel "at home" in a particular vision of the future an appendix of sources for background details might be included with a Future Fiction story. But I think that repeated use of the same background settings would soon make FF readers as familiar with the conventions of certain "possible worlds of tomorrow" as they are with many historical periods--not through overt study but by osmosis. We have never visited Sherlock Holmes's London, or Matt Dillon's Dodge City, or Tolkein's Middle Earth, or James Kirk's Starship Enterprise. Yet these locations are all believable to us and have all been used as settings by more than one author. Similarly, the grim 21st century world

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envisioned in the Club of Rome's LIMITS TO GROWTH, the prosperous Year 2000 of Herman Kahn's Long-Term Multifold Trend, or any of the SEVEN TOMORROWS foreseen by Paul Hawken, James Ogilvy and Peter Schwartz could all become "real places" for us once story-tellers began to populate them with believable people chasing after believable dreams.

Prototypes and Prospects for Future Fiction

Future Fiction, as I've tried to suggest, is not identical with science fiction; but there are many other prototypes and models for such writing in literature--both fiction and non-fiction. One of these is the contemporary historical novel. Compared to earlier novels, like Walter Scott's Ivanhoe, the serious historical novel of today tends to be set in a period of cultural transition, and to treat individuals as human beings, who think and act in accordance with the knowledge, traditions, and values of their own time. The events described are based on competent scholarship, and characters speak in today's speech, not some attempt to reproduce the "quaintness" of long-ago and far away.[5]

Another model for Future Fiction is that often-maligned institution the "formula" best-seller or blockbuster made-for-TV miniseries. Like Roots or Holocaust or Shogun, Future Fiction can reduce enormous events to human scale by depicting their impact on a few individuals or families whose characters are drawn in enough detail that we come to care intensely what happens to them.

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Mention of television leads to my final point about Future Fiction--it should not be thought of as exclusively a prose genre dependent on the print medium. It could equally well take the form of artwork, drama, lyric poetry, role-playing games, or interactive simulation--with or without computer assistance. I offer as examples, the picture book Unbuilding by David Macaulay, which depicts how the Empire State Building could be dismantled in the early 1990s;[6] the "Lifegames" series of young adult fiction in Signet paperback, which invites readers to roleplay their own futures in different careers by means of a programmed text that branches the plot at key decision-points;[7] and a short poem entitled "Utopia" from the book Essays in Design by British architect and planner J. Christopher Jones.[8]

I'm not saying that every scenario a futurist prepares needs to be fictionalized, nor that every science fiction writer needs to draw upon "serious" futures research. But I do see an opportunity to create and refine convincing, inspiring images of possible futures derived from serious futures research by making these vivid, dramatic, and personal through works of art that focus on people not ideas or technology.

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NOTES

1. For a brief look at the ways in which science fiction can contribute to future studies see Dennis Livingston, "The Utility of Science Fiction," in Jib Fowles (ed) Handbook of Futures Research (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), pp. 163-178.

2. Ian H. Wilson quotes these definitions in his article on "Scenarios" in Fowles (ed), Handbook pp. 225-248.

3. Wilson, "Scenarios" in Fowles (ed) Handbook, p. 233-235.

4. Ben Bova, Notes to a Science Fiction Writer (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

5. Martin S. Day, History of English Literature 1837 to the Present (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 420-421.

6. David Macauley, Unbuilding (New York: Houghton Mifflin, N.D. [1981]).

7. For example Michael Thompson, Go For It! (New York: Signet, New American Library, 1983). Other titles in Signet's Lifegames Series include Man on the Fast Track, Starstruck, Woman Up the Corporate Ladder, and Woman in Power Politics (the latter three written by Angela Harper. The background for all of these "possible futures" assumes absolutely no significant change in current social or economic conditions; but the same format could be used to enable readers to plot themselves through career choices in alternative future societies.

8. J. Christopher Jones, Essays in Design (New York:John Wiley & Sons, 1984), pp. 261-263.